

'We can be anything'

At meeting, kids say learning disabilities don't hold them back

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Christian Strange (top), 12, leads his group in an activity designed to teach determination and collaboration at Concord High School in Wilmington on Thursday. / SPECIAL TO THE NEWS JOURNAL/SAQUAN STIMPSON

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Christian Strange wants to be an architect. His friend Chris Coulston wants to be a social worker.

Both are from Wilmington. Both have learning disabilities but want teachers, parents other students and possible employers to know they are educable and resourceful.

"We are two kids trying to inspire others," Christian, 12, and Chris, 14, told a roomful of guests, including parents, school administrators, teachers and politicians who attended the first Brandywine Special Needs Parent Teacher Association meeting at Concord High School on Thursday night.

Chris and Christian, along with other students, were the stars of the night for an effort BSNPTA wants people to know about.

"We can be anything if you give us the opportunity," said Chris, a Concord High School student.

The BSNPTA hosted the event, titled Kids Inspiring Kids, to allow attendees to listen to youths with special needs who have advocated for themselves while in school or transitioning from school to work or high school to college. Students who spoke provided training and helpful tips for others about how they still learn, but maybe differently because of their disabilities. They also said advocating for themselves helped them continue to be productive. They stressed collaboration, communication and setting goals for themselves.

"We've got to empower them. If we empower them, they will feel better about themselves," said Ellen Coulston, parent and member of the BSNPTA. "They have something to contribute."

Coulston is Chris' mother. Throughout the years, seeing speech therapists and learning specialists with her son has helped her see how much children with special needs have to contribute and encouraged people to stop looking at them only from the outside.

Her 19-year-old son, Clement, has a brain injury that affects his language and memory, which stemmed from a car accident during his senior year at Salesianum High School.

Clement is a sophomore at the University of Delaware studying elementary education. He learned to advocate for himself after recovering from his accident and still does it in college. He and a classmate and friend, Emma Hansen, also a UD student with a brain injury, encouraged younger students to do the same.

Supportive parents like Ellen Coulston are one of the driving engines that make students continue to work hard.

Christian Strange's father participated in a demonstration that he and Chris did in front of the classroom. His mother and father continue to believe in him, he said.

"My parents are good parents," said Christian, a student at Gateway Lab Charter School. "They believe in me. Many people don't succeed in life. Many people do. The important thing to do is to keep trying. That's what my dad said."

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